

FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 5 May 2002

May Meeting

Rabbi Robert Barr Discusses "Judaism with a Humanistic Perspective"

Judaism with a Humanistic Perspective is a phrase that secular humanists and other humanists have puzzled about. To satisfy our curiosity about this blend of Judaism and humanism, Rabbi Barr has agreed to talk to FIG about it. He is the ideal person to do this since he heads Cincinnati's Congregation Beth Adam which approaches Judaism from this perspective. He will tell us how he became involved this liberal approach to Judaism. He will also relate something about the history of these ideas and their relationship to Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

Rabbi Robert B. Barr was ordained by the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Under his direction membership in Beth Adam has grown to more than 300 adults, who now enjoy the recent construction of a home of their own in Loveland. He is active in the leadership of many community organizations, as well as in Jewish organizations throughout the country. Recognized by his peers as a leader in the evolution of modern, liberal Judaism, his writings have been published in journals, books and Web sites around the world.



And he's a great speaker -- informative, energetic, and humorous. Last time he spoke to us, it was about the then current effort to put the Ten Commandments in front of public schools. I wanted to head up my report "Rabbi Wows FIG." My title was toned down, but he did! Come for an enjoyable as well as informative evening.

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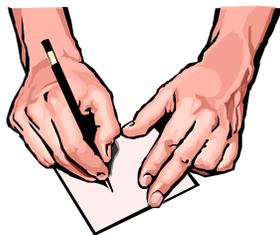
Events

May Meeting
Wednesday April 23
at 7:00 P.M.
Vernon Manor Hotel

June Potluck
Sunday, June 16
at 2:00 P.M.

Letter from the Editor

Dear Fig Members:



Tolerance and respect: two words, two goals of civil society that have become familiar refrains to most of us. I realize that until recently I have assumed that the “god-fearing” among us are entitled to a generous measure of both. At the same time, I rarely presume that reciprocity is commonplace. Lately, however I don’t feel like being such a good sport in a lopsided game.

Those of us who don’t populate our worldview with supernatural beings are often accused of being “godless” and thus by definition having no ethics or values. While I comfortably admit the first point, it’s the derivative conclusion, of course, that rankles. Lately, as I am bombarded by an epidemic of allegations and confessions of child sexual abuse, rape and cover-up by some of the most “godful” individuals and institutions, I feel smugly serene in my chosen domain. This is a domain wherein humans, flawed but heroic as often as horrible, work hard to make the world a little better today than it was yesterday, to spread the bounty a little more widely and generously. It is a domain that often requires responsibility for and protection from the violent capacity of our natures as well as an honest view of the genetic hand we have been dealt. In other words, to recognize ourselves: human, not saintly. I can live with that. In fact, that is what we all live with.

In America at least, many of us in this minority position have graciously tolerated the public posturing of the people planning on going to heaven. It’s as if we had a sixth sense about the vulnerability and desperation of their need not to be interfered with, not to mention having a healthy respect for the rage and arrogance stirred up by disbelieving questioners. But I find myself becoming more courageous and outspoken lately, for several reasons. First, it’s

hard to ignore the circular logic required to promote “Creationism” and other ideas, ideas without foundation. Second, my background in psychology reminds me of the fragility as well as the power of a shared delusional system, i.e., if a lot of us think the same thing, protest it loudly and brook no opposition, then we are safe from scrutiny. Third, from a marketing point of view it is undeniable that the promise of salvation and eternal life is hard to beat and will be enthusiastically chosen. What earthly bounty could compete with those rewards? Reason and scientific method do not even come close. But popular doesn’t always pass the taste test. So I’m still not convinced or converted. Yet I can fully appreciate the wish to be safe and protected by powerful forces that religious adherence offers. But lately, co-existing with the godly has gone way past inconvenient.

I don’t mind the Christmas frenzy so much; I can relate to shopping and sales. But I do mind when those who can’t face the grimness of mortality influence public policy and public safety. It’s hard to recruit suicide bombers, or to find zealots ready to fly planes into buildings if you can’t promise them rewards in the afterlife. To ask an ordinary man or woman to deny an essential part of human nature, such as his or her sexuality, for an ideal, and not to expect frequent failure and acts of desperation seems naïve. So I read the newspaper with little satisfaction, lately, but with more anxiety. Belief unfazed by reality has no limitations. My imagination is too earthbound to envision what lies ahead.

Idelle Datlof

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FIG Member Meeting April, 2002

Intelligent Design: The Notorious Wedge Strategy

The speaker of the evening was Wolf Roder, Professor of Geography at UC and long time FIG member. He started by distinguishing the three types of creationism: the YEC 's, the OEC 's, and the ID's.

The first mentioned are the young earth creationists familiar to local people as Answers in Genesis in Northern Kentucky allied with the Creation Research Institute in San Diego.

The second group is identified as old earth creationists who admit that the earth is indeed very old. One protagonist reconciles the age of the earth with the Book of Genesis by extending the meaning of the "days of creation" to 15 billion years.

The third group, the ID's stands for intelligent design. They work from the Discovery Institute, a "think tank" on the West Coast, a part of which is the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture.

The rest of Roder's presentation was divided into three subheadings:

- I. What is Intelligent Design?
- II. What is happening in Ohio with regard to new State standards relating to Science education?
- III. Aims of Discovery Institute and the Wedge Strategy

Intelligent Design is a very old idea, which assumes that the earth and the universe are so complicated that a creator must have designed them. William Paley, a scientist and preacher, in his book first enunciated the most famous metaphor.

Published at the end of the 18th century, *Natural Theology, Evidence for a Deity*. He stated that if one finds a watch in a meadow one must assume that someone made the watch and that someone was a watchmaker. The error is in applying the concept of a man-made object with living things. All living things, plants and animals, come from either seeds or eggs. The

main leaders of this modern movement are Philip Johnson, a lawyer who is not a scientist, William Dembski, a mathematician, who claims to be able to distinguish between an artifact and something created, and Michael Behe, a biochemist, whose primary contribution is the concept of "irreducible complexity," viz., that some biological structures are irreducibly complex so that no intermediates from simpler forms are possible. These are some of the basic ideas of the Intelligent Design proponents.

Roder then turned to the second subheading as to what is happening in Ohio. The State Board of Education is an elected body. Part of their responsibility is overseeing the curriculum of public schools by establishing standards to be met.

The standards are being rewritten as a result of the Education Act recently passed by the Congress and signed by President Bush. Ohio is the first state to do this. The Board itself does not write the standards, which are being written by a writing team made up of teachers and scientists who are qualified professionally to write them. This Team has completed its work. They stuck to their guns and included evolution as the subject to be taught in the science curriculum for grades 5-12.

An Ohio group called Science Education for All Ohioans, allied with James Dobson's Focus on the Family a right wing group, invited a former member of the Kansas Board of Education to address the Ohio State Board as a proponent of ID. Ohio Citizens for Science and the Ohio Academy of Science protested and then the Board asked for a debate. Jonathan Wells one of the big three, and Stephen Meyer, Director of the Center for Renewal of Science and Culture, debated Ken Miller, a biologist and devout Christian and Lawrence Krauss, physics professor at Case Western Reserve. In the course of the debate there was a reference to 44 articles supporting ID that had been published in peer review journals. It developed upon examination of these articles that there had been a disclaimer on these articles stating in effect that they did not support ID theory nor

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express doubt about evolution. This disclaimer was omitted from the copies delivered to the State Board. Further examination revealed that these articles although valid in themselves had nothing to do with Intelligent Design.

Roder hazarded a guess that the State Board would stick with evolution and ignore ID in the curriculum. He then turned to the third subheading dealing with the "wedge strategy." ID proponents are defined in a new book edited by Robert Pennock, *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics* as the "cryptoscientific arm of a sociopolitical movement of conservative Christians who are upset about the displacement of their concept of God from the institutional life in the United States and are determined to do something about it." They attribute this displacement to three 19th century figures, Darwin, Marx and Freud. Of these only Darwin has managed to hold his own into the 21st century. Roder considers them mistaken in their attributions. They should instead blame Copernicus when he formulated his theory that the planets orbited the sun rather than the other way around. This idea was further refined by Kepler and Newton.

After the usual break, there were questions from the audience. One questioner asked what had happened in Kansas. The answer was that the State Board of Education had removed the teaching of evolution and the big bang from the standards, which effectively removed them from the curriculum. There was an outcry and Kansas became a laughing stock among the educational community in the country. As a result during the subsequent election the board members who had engineered the changes were defeated and the new board members reversed their action. Another questioner asked whether ID proponents cited any new discoveries that support their contentions. The most scientific of the ID group is Michael Behe and he cites the cilia of a microorganism that propels it and also the clotting of blood in mammals as being so complex that if one of the chemicals is missing the process does not work. He draws the conclusion that this process is too complex to

be attributed to chance and a creator must have done it. As usual Wolf Roder provided an interesting evening.

George Maurer

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ON THE LIGHTER SIDE.....

A Baptist couple felt it important to own an equally Baptist pet, so they went shopping. At a kennel specializing in Baptist dogs, they found one that they liked a lot. When they asked the dog to fetch the Bible, he did it in a flash. When they instructed him to look up Psalm 23, he complied equally fast, using his paws with dexterity. Impressed, they purchased the animal and went home. That night, they had friends over. They were so proud of the new Baptist dog and his skills, they called the dog and showed off a little. The friends were impressed, and asked whether the dog was able to do any of the usual dog tricks as well. This stopped the couple cold, as they hadn't thought of normal dog tricks. "Well," they said, "let's try it out." Once more they called the dog and they clearly pronounced the command, "Heel." Quick as a wink, the dog jumped up, put his paw on the man's forehead, closed his eyes in concentration, and bowed his head... It was then that the couple realized they'd been deceived. The dog was Pentecostal.

Students Are The Big Surprise at Debate on God

You'd be surprised what most students are doing on a Monday night at a typical college campus. Not studying. Not partying. Not watching their basketball team try to make the Final Four.

No, they're participating in a debate on the existence of God.

At least that's what hundreds of Miami University students were doing on Monday night, April 15. And they were treated to evening of surprises, delights—and at least one big disappointment.

The biggest surprise of the evening was the students themselves. The medium-sized lecture hall was filled to standing-room-only—and not only with members of the two sponsoring organizations. In fact, members of the Organization of Atheists and Agnostics and the NAME Christian fraternity seemed to be in the distinct minority. A few quick conversations revealed that many students simply heard about the lecture and decided to come hear the arguments for and against God's existence. More than one FIG member in attendance was heard commenting on how encouraged they were that so many students were interested in the subject matter.

Perhaps even more surprising were the open minds displayed by the students. While many FIG members anticipated a strong pro-God bias from the audience, this did not seem to be the case. Students proved to be split between supporters of the affirmative (God exists) and the negative (God does not exist). During the question and answer period, which lasted long into the night, some of the most challenging questions of the affirmative side came from students who identified themselves as believers. For example, one student questioned the representative of the "pro-God" side why he had not made any attempt to explain the many contradictions and inaccuracies in the Bible.

Unfortunately, this line of questioning points out what was the one great disappointment of the evening: the failure of Dr. Ben Voth, arguing in the affirmative, to make

any cogent argument in support of the existence of God. This was surprising, considering his credentials. He is the director of forensics at Miami and a professor of communication. Nevertheless, his case for the existence of God was disappointing at best, nonexistent at worst.

Dr. Voth's argument, articulated in his opening statement, can be summarized in three points: 1) Dr. Voth has lived a life of joy since accepting Jesus Christ as his savior; therefore, God exists; 2) when Dr. Voth looks at his daughters Rebecca, Sarah and Anna (he held up a picture of them and called them the "RSA factor"), he can feel the love of God; therefore, God exists; 3) the Bible, an historical document with substantial external corroboration, describes the resurrection of Jesus Christ; therefore, Jesus truly was resurrected and God must exist. The balance of Dr. Voth's remarks had nothing to do with the existence of God, but rather with the relative morality of atheists and Christians and the role of the church in the state.

Arguing against the existing of God, one of FIG's favorite and most provocative members, Edwin Kagin, quickly dispatched Dr. Voth's first two arguments. And he did so with a simple statement: there are plenty of atheists who live lives of joy and love their children. That ended the debate on those two points. Dr. Voth did not even try to respond.

Dr. Voth's third contention, that the Bible is an historical document that proves the divinity of Jesus and existence of God, at least provided some fodder for debate. Edwin responded by skewering the historical accuracy of the Bible, pointing out its many inaccuracies and internal inconsistencies. For example, he pointed out that the different books of the New Testament give different dates for the crucifixion of Jesus and dramatically different accounts of Jesus' ministry. He also raised the question of why no contemporaneous historians documented any of Jesus' presumed miracles.

*This rebuttal
(Continued on page 6)*

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seemed convincing to the audience, who peppered Dr. Voth with questions about the Bible's many shortcomings as an historical document.

The lack of a strong affirmative argument on the part of Dr. Voth was truly disappointing. As Edwin himself pointed out, the best argument for the existence of God is that the universe exists. If the universe exists, it must have come from somewhere. It would have been interesting for Dr. Voth to build a logical argument for the existence of God on this (or any other) basis. Unfortunately, he did not. As a result, much of the debate revolved around ancillary and often unpleasant issues, such as the separation of church and state (which Dr. Voth opposes) and the relative evil perpetrated by Christians versus atheists (Dr. Voth managed to blame the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution and every other genocide of the 20th Century on atheists).

Although the debate did not provide the opportunity for much real debating, it did provide opportunity for Edwin to display his wonderful wit and offbeat charm. This was truly the great delight of the evening. Edwin opened the debate with a hilarious, self-deprecating joke (at his funeral he wants a sign in his coffin reading "Here lies an atheist, all dressed up and nowhere to go") and continued to charm the crowd with witticism after witticism. As the debate turned away from the existence of God to less pleasant topics, Edwin continued to win over crowd with his wit and personality. I wouldn't be surprised if he walked out of the debate with a few converts. God bless him.

Vain are the thousand creeds that move
men's hearts, unutterably vain, worthless as
wither'd weeds.

-- Emily Brontë, No Coward Soul (January,
1846), quoted from James A. Haught,
"Breaking the Last Taboo" (1996)

Celebrities in Hell has just been published

Warren Allen Smith, the author of the celebrated "Who's Who in Hell," spoke to FIG last December. At that time, he told us that a book about the celebrities in the more comprehensive work would be published soon. It is now available.

Included are atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists, and just about every other strain of skeptic imaginable. Some of the names familiar to readers are: Woody Allen, Marlon Brando, George Carlin, George Clooney, Marlene Dietrich, Jodie Foster, Katharine Hepburn, Sally Jesse Raphael, Christopher Reeve, Howard Stern, and Uma Thurman.

"Celebrities in Hell" can be bought online:

From barnesandnoble.com for \$20.51
In New York City, the book with 8.25%
tax is \$16.18

From amazon.com the book is \$14.46

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BOOK REVIEW

Exterminate All the Brutes!

By Sven Lindqvist

Translated from the Swedish by Joan Tate (New York: The New Press, 1997)

On the face of it this is the story of a man traveling across the Sahara Desert from Algiers to Zinder while composing a literary appreciation. To be able to write, he drags with him a computer and a library of literature on diskettes. A recurring theme is the constant struggle to keep the desert dust out of his equipment. But, why does the man keep having nightmares? The title phrase comes from Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel Heart of Darkness. These are the last words spoken by the man Captain Marlow was sent to rescue from darkest Africa.

The killing was not confined to King Leopold's Congo, but extended to the natives of every continent the white imperialists conquered, to end in Hitler's murderous conquest of eastern Europe. As the trucks and busses carry him deeper into the African continent, Lindqvist contemplates the fate of native peoples throughout the Age of Imperialism. Beginning with the first footsteps of Columbus in America, their numbers shrink, they disappear, they die. The unquestioned conquest of native lands results in the "extermination of the brutes!" The natives die of European diseases, of massacres, of being dispossessed of their land, of forced relocation into desert and wilderness. Most of all the natives die because the Imperialists disrupt their society and destroy their culture, so that ultimately they have nothing left to live for.

Lindqvist the traveler examines particularly the development of nineteenth century scientific thought. He writes about the work of Charles Lyell, the insights of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, and of the leading philosopher of the day, Herbert Spencer. From Cuvier to Lamarck, from Darwin to Hitler the accepted scientific insight was that there existed inferior races, and that these

would gradually die out under the tutelage of the superior. To early anthropologists it was obvious the inferior races could not be saved. In The Descent of Man Darwin expressed his conviction that between the primates such as the gorilla and civilized man there existed intermediate human forms stuck in barbarism and savagery. As occurs in nature, Darwin wrote in a letter, the weaker human races would lose out in the struggle for existence to the more intellectual. And, perhaps, if they don't go willingly some help could be given to extermination.

The author is bound from Air to Agadez in the Niger Republic. The road consists of great slabs of stone. Thirty-two people are squeezed into a truck. "Are these the savages Darwin had thought we civilized white men should exterminate? That is hard to imagine when you are sitting in the same minibus." (p. 109)

The writings of Joseph Conrad, Herbert George Wells, and Rudyard Kipling assume and reflect the dominant thinking of the times. At the same time along with Charles Dilke and R. B. Cunningham-Graham there begins a faint criticism of the scientific and scholarly assumptions. Is the death of the native races really a scientific inevitability or perhaps a consequence of white men's greed for land and labor. Yet little could they prevail against scientific knowledge. After Darwin, race became the decisive explanation of mankind, and the justification for conquest.

The geographer Friedrich Ratzel provides a most interesting case. He is considered not only a father of human geography but also of cultural anthropology. He was trained in biology and thus understood and accepted Darwin's thinking. He also had traveled widely as a journalist before settling as professor in Leipzig. "The theory that this dying out is predestined by the inner weakness of the individual race is faulty", he wrote early on (p. 144). It is the Europeans who kill, enslave, impoverish, drive away, and destroy their social organization. That was before Germany acquired colonies. After 1890 Ratzel's tune changed. Now, there are inner forces of

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SUBJECT: SHOULD ETHICS BE BASED ON REASON OR DOGMA?

Absolutism is superior to relativism as a position from which to approach moral issues, according to Professor Kenneth H. Funk II. In his op/ed (April 10), he goes beyond a discussion of specific ethical issues to a more fundamental question, "the nature and applicability of moral standards and how we frame our arguments about them."

According to Prof. Funk, moral relativism holds that standards of human behavior are relative to a particular time, culture, or individual – that no set of standards necessarily applies to more than one age, people, or person. In contrast, moral absolutism holds that moral standards are absolute, universal, and perhaps eternal. He is using "relativism" as a code word for the secular, humanistic worldview, and "absolutism" for the religious worldview.

He argues that the relativist can condemn the absolutist only by abandoning relativism, because this condemnation requires a universally-applicable standard: the relativist has taken an absolute position. The absolutist faces no such contradiction. Now the most common absolutist (religious) moral position in our society is that of Christianity. Here, the absolutist dog-

mas supposedly originate from a supernatural ("outside of nature") being who, in spite of being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all that, has to communicate its "moral absolutes" to humans by crude and devious means. These include ancient sacred texts, authorities who claim a direct connection to it, such as clergy, revelation, and "faith." In this schema, obedience to this creature's will is the basis of ethics: whatever it says is right, is right; whatever it says is wrong, is wrong. The absolutist is to accept these dogmas in a childlike manner, never questioning them. He is to worship (grovel before) this tyrant, and never take responsibility for his or her own behavior. He acts only to gain a reward or avoid punishment. It is the ethic of the slave and the coward. Note, incidentally, that many "moral absolutes" that some religious people try to force on us, such as opposition to abortion, have no support in their holy books. They are just using religion as a tool to force their "moral" views on the rest of us. In contrast, the Humanist moral position bases ethics on human experience, and on a concern for human welfare or happiness in the greatest, long-term sense. It is consistent with science, reason,

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destruction released in the inferior races.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Hitler was growing up in the multi-ethnic Austrian Empire. "The air he and all other Western people in his childhood breathed was soaked in the conviction that imperialism is a biologically necessary process, which, according to the laws of nature, leads to the inevitable destruction of the lower races. It was a conviction which had already cost millions of human lives before Hitler provided his highly personal application." (p. 141) Lindqvist concludes Hitler repeated in the center of Europe what had been done on the American prairies and in the Heart of Africa.

Wolf Roder

WWJD??

The question has come up in Whittlesea, Australia according to the *Melbourne Herald Sun*. If (or when) Jesus returns, would or could he heal the afflicted as he is reported to have done in the various Gospel accounts. Suppose he heals a paralyzed person, could his or her caretaker sue him for depriving them of job and livelihood? Would there be lingering consequences of a long paralysis, weak muscles, poorly operating limbs. Could Jesus be sued for medical malpractice? If he recalls a dead person to life, how would his heirs feel, already having divided his estate? Could they sue Jesus for damages. How would Jesus defend himself, would he have money to hire an attorney? Could he retreat to heaven, where, it is widely and well known, there are no lawyers.

Reported by theologian Franz Bibfeldt Jr.

and reality; it contends that human beings are a part of nature, that they have developed as a result of evolutionary processes, and that their values – ethical, political, and social – have their sources in human experience and culture. What is right or wrong, or the degree of “rightness” or “wrongness,” depends on the circumstances. Could a real god, worthy of the name, really be offended by such an ethic? In spite of Prof. Funk’s logical arguments, then, human welfare and the long-term survival of our (and other) species are simply better served by the Humanist ethic.

Sometimes, a practical example can illuminate the falsity of an arcane argument. Prof. Funk himself presents the example: “it is wrong to take a human life,” he insists: the circumstances don’t matter; there can never be an exception. Most of us, however, recognize that it is right to defend ones elf or others against attack, even if the attacker is killed. Who would not defend his or her child against an attacker, even if it were necessary to kill the attacker? There are no “moral absolutists” at such a time!

Likewise, there are no “believers” in fox-holes. All sane people are afraid of and try to avoid death.

Still, arguing strictly from logic has its merits. Prof. Funk overlooked the fact that, before one can accept a particular absolutist dogma, one must first select it. But there are countless systems of absolutist dogma, and an infinite number conceivable. For one inclined toward absolutism, and who thus rejects human experience and concern for human welfare as an ethical foundation, there is no ethical basis for preferring one such system over another. There isn’t even any reason to select a system at all. With no ethical foundation prior to selecting a particular absolutist system, such a person would have no notion of good and evil.

Therefore it is clear that one can select a particular absolutist worldview only if one is actually a relativist. Regardless of the supernatural fantasies and assertions of the absolutists, we all are relativists!

John S. Dearing, President
CORVALLIS SECULAR SOCIETY

(This letter was printed Monday, April 15, in the OSU Daily Barometer [the student newspaper at Oregon State University]. Courtesy of Joe Levee)

Notice Date: long before 9/11

A partial accounting of American delinquency during the Clinton years includes the failure to pay its full UN dues, the refusal, since Somalia, to place American troops under direct UN command, the refusal to sign the landmines treaty, the refusal to sign the Statute of Rome, the refusal to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty, and the pursuit of a national missile defense scheme which, if realized, would almost certainly undermine most of the existing arms limitation agreements with Russia. While refusing to be bound by rules agreed on by large groups of nations, the US has meanwhile come up with sanctions against some 60 countries which have offended it in one way or another. The Congress, it appears, believes it has a right to legislate for the world, but the world has no right to legislate for the US.

Comment by Martin Woollacott in *The Guardian*, UK (20 Feb. 2000)

Wishing Upon a Star

An obvious question to ask is: Where there any other accounts of a Nativity star, apart from the one described in the Bible? And the answer is yes. It was commonly reported that magi followed a star to the man-god’s birthplace, and brought expensive gifts for the divine child. But this was seven centuries before Matthew’s event, and the god on that occasion was Zarathustra.

Earlier still, the birth of Abraham was also heralded by a new star. So was the birth of Krishna. The same went for Hercules, and Osiris, and Bacchus, and Mithra, and Hermes, and Prometheus, and Perseus, and Horus (and they also had the obligatory god for a father and a virgin for a mother). The fact of the matter is, if your god was going to be anybody worth paying attention to, his resume just had to include a Birth Star.

Lewis Jones, *Skeptical Briefs* (Dec. 2001)
p. 15



Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
[Massimo Pigliucci](#)

N. 24, May 2002
The meaning of life
(sort of...)

Suppose you are watching a very entertaining movie. Whatever movie it is that you might think of that way, it doesn't matter. If your juices are set in motion by an "intellectual" film like *My Dinner with André*, so be it; if you go for romance or special effects and such, like *Titanic*, that would do, too. Chances are that, when the movie is over (let's say, when the credits start rolling), you will feel both a sense of satisfaction and one of regret. It's great that you managed to see such a good movie, but did it have to finish this soon? Couldn't the director have given us an extra half hour of dialogue, or action, or simply of screen presence of the actors? Well, the director possibly tried, and the producer cut out the extra scenes to keep the movie to a manageable length (and, if you're lucky, you'll get to see the "uncut" version in DVD anyway).

Now, imagine that the movie is your life, and the closing credits are announcing your departure from this world. If you're lucky, this particular movie (which at least in part you both directed and starred in) gave you the same sense of satisfaction. And, I bet you are also very saddened to see the credits scroll by, regardless of your opinion regarding an afterlife. I suggest that the reason for both these feelings (satisfaction and regret) is precisely because, very likely, there is no afterlife. Contrary to popular understanding, it is precisely the finiteness of our existence that gives meaning to our life. If we truly lived forever (in this or in any other world), we would be bored stiff and continually looking for a way

to commit suicide (which, of course, would be impossible). Now, that is my definition of Hell.

How can this be? Well, think back to the movie we started with. Sure, you could have used another twenty minutes of *André*, and possibly were curious to see in a bit more detail what happened to some of the characters in *Titanic* after the ship went down (I mean those who survived). But, could you stomach a never-ending version of it? I mean, even soap operas, after a while, become redundant and boring (OK, maybe right after they begin, but that's another story). Human beings are simply not made for ever-afters, happy or not.

On the contrary, what we thrive on is continuous challenge: always new problems to solve, new "finish lines" to pass. We contemplate our accomplishments with satisfaction; but the satisfaction quickly turns into unbearable boredom if we don't have something else to look forward to. As Dante Alighieri makes Odysseus say in his (Divine) Comedy, "Fatti non foste per viver come bruti / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza" (You were not made to live like brutes / But to pursue virtue and knowledge). The operative word here is "seguir," to pursue. Odysseus is explaining to Dante (who is visiting Hell) why he kept wandering the world in search of adventures, even though he had a home, a lovely wife and a devoted son, and people to take care of (he was king of the Greek city of Ithaca).

Now, I'm not suggesting that we are all driven by Odysseus' mania for new experiences, but isn't this the same basic drive which we find at the root of so much depression, drug abuse, and even conflicts in the world? When human beings don't have something to look forward to (either because they have too little, and no hope to achieve anything worth achieving; or because they have too much, and don't have any distant finish-line to look forward to), they turn into themselves with invariably dark consequences.

But that is exactly the problem with eternity: if you've got all the time to do whatever it is that you can think of doing, you will exhaust any possible goal you can set for yourself. Then

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Quote of the month:
"Life has to be given a meaning because of the obvious fact that it has no meaning."
(Henry Miller)

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what? Then you'll find yourself in the same situation of one of the races of aliens described in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (one of my favorite contemporary philosophical works). The aliens in question happened to be immortal, a very unfortunate condition which they coped with by inventing all sorts of ways to pass their endless time. At the moment they appear in the book, they are involved in the project of personally insulting every sentient organism in the universe in its own tongue. But, of course, it is a desperate (and meaningless) attempt to retard the inevitable: eventually, they'll run out of beings to insult, and of insults to hurl at them.

The point was, arguably, already clear to Dante: his *Comedy* (in the sense of a play, not because it is particularly funny) is divided into three sections: *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory, you know, he was Catholic), and *Paradiso* (Heaven). While the latter should have been the most exciting place to be (after all, you get to spend the rest of eternity—a contradictory concept in itself—basking in the light of God), it was, by far, the dullest, with the *Inferno* as the place where the action is interesting and the characters are endlessly fascinating and, well, so human.

Contemplating the meaning of life is one of humankind's oldest occupations and we are peculiar for inventing all sorts of fabulous stories to make sense of our existence. One of the minimalist answers I run into puts the futility of such an effort in good evidence. It's a cartoon with a series of living organisms, from simple creatures to more and more complex ones, ending, obviously, with humans. The caption says: "The meaning of life?" Every creature has a balloon that says "Eat, sleep, reproduce;" -- all except for the human's, which asks: "What is the meaning of life?"

There is more to life than eating, sleeping and reproducing (though those are indeed fairly basic components). For example: writing columns or watching movies; being kind to your friends and relatives; and being at least decent to the rest of humanity. But, despite all our mythologies depicting an everlasting happiness in this or other worlds, we would condemn ourselves to a miserable eternity.

What then? Well, just make sure that your double role as director and star of your life's movie is worthy of an Academy Award. It shouldn't be that difficult...

Next month:

Ecology vs. ecophily: being reasonable about saving the environment

Further readings:

Dante: *The Divine Comedy*, where you will find plenty to think about on the meaning of life.
Ten Theories of Human Nature, by L.F. Stevenson and D.L. Haberman, where you can pick and mix your favorite view of the good life.

Web links:

The American Philosophical Association, a good organization to join to understand what other people thought about meaning in life
The Society for Philosophical Inquiry, to help you find your own meaning in life.

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Many thanks to Melissa Brenneman and Bob Faulkner for patiently editing and commenting on *Rationally Speaking* columns.

How to become famous ... academic distinction in economics is not to be had from giving a clear account of how the world works. Keynes knew that; had he made his *General Theory* completely comprehensible, it would have been ignored. Economists value most the colleague whom they most struggle to understand. The pride they feel in eventually succeeding leads to admiration for the man who set them so difficult a task. And anyone who cannot be understood at all will be especially admired. All will want to give the impression that they have penetrated his mystification. This accords him a standing above all others.

John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Tenured Professor* (1990) p. 50